

Changing Attitudes towards Ageing and the Aged amongst Psychology Students

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Introduction

Society is ageing. In Europe, the ageing of the population is a recurrent and discussed theme. Portugal is no exception and recent data indicate that the over-65 population is gradually approaching one-fifth of the total population (Instituto Nacional de Estatística (INE), 2007). Therefore, the graphic representation of the demographic data, usually done through an age pyramid, now presents an inversion with a narrowing of its base and a widening at the top.

The impact of the ageing of the population is varied and transversal in different fields. The increase in the number of elderly people implies an increase in the levels of dependence and, consequently, more sanitary, physical and human resources. Also, the number of professionals linked directly or indirectly to the elderly increases according to the increase in the ageing population. Opportunities for the development of professional careers progressively appear and the new demographic panorama demands innovative tasks and services, appealing to the imagination of the professionals to answer the emerging needs.

Psychology students can potentially develop their professional careers close to the elderly. The history of psychology close to the elderly is still recent when compared to other disciplines such as social work or nursing. Initial proposals on human development, of which Freud and Piaget are undoubtedly the better known representatives, imposed a restrictive view of development stagnation after adolescence (Vandenplas & Holper, 1998–2000). Starting in the middle of the 20th century, however, new perspectives on the potential of human development emerged, keeping in mind different factors for the promotion of and adaptation to the ageing process, gathered under the common designation of psychology of the life cycle (Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Baltes & Carstensen, 1999; Bengtson, Rice & Johnson, 1999; Fonseca, 2005).

At present, psychology of the life cycle is subscribed consensually as one of the preferred ways of understanding the ageing processes, opening a wide field of research and activity. The role to be played by researchers and psychology professionals is progressively increasing. At the level of theoretical models, it is still necessary to answer different questions, among which the understanding of individual factors (biological and psychological) that characterise and differentiate the ageing process. In fieldwork, one highlights issues related to the promotion of the functionality and the adaptation to changes and characteristics of the person who is growing old.

Despite the existence of a vast field of work in this area, psychology students' interest¹ in working with the elderly is generally low. In fact, they do not manifest

a spontaneous interest either in the field of research or the performing of specific tasks (Prudent & Tan, 2002; Tan, Zhang & Fan, 2004). When analysing their lack of interest, international literature seems to indicate the existence of three significant factors: (i) the manifested attitudes facing the age variable and a hypothetical scenario of working with the elderly; (ii) the prejudice and stereotypes associated with the ageing processes and the elderly, and also the performing of professional functions in this sphere; and (iii) the gaps in factual knowledge. It is in this context that we will first analyse some general concepts on attitudes, suggesting afterwards some studies that analysed this theme from the specific point of view of the development of a professional career.

Attitudes, Stereotypes and Knowledge about Ageing and the Aged

The study of attitudes has a consistent history in the field of social psychology. In 1954, Allport characterised attitudes as one-dimensional, assessing judgements constituting negative feelings amongst members of specific social groups (Nesdale & Durkin, 1998). That is, an attitude consists of an assessment of a certain object with which the individual associates satisfaction or dissatisfaction (Ajzen, 1991; Brief, 1998; Myers, 2002). Attitudes are usually represented by three components: affective (direction, intensity and involvement of different emotions), cognitive (beliefs and thoughts) and behavioural (action or intentional action) (Brief, 1998; Feldma, 1985). The answer to the assessment carried out can be explicit or implicit, affective, cognitive or behavioural (Brief, 1998).

The formation of attitudes occurs primarily through social learning (Baron & Byrne, 1994; Brief, 1998). The observation of the context in which it is inserted and of the reactions of the different actors, initially in the family and later with peers and teachers, conditions the answer of the individual to various social objects (Feldma, 1985). The moulding, observation and reinforcement permit the explanation of the existence of attitudes even in the absence of direct contact with the targeted object of our attitude. The formation of attitudes can also be through direct experience with the targeted entity of the attitude (Baron & Byrne, 1994). It is important to stress that this direct contact can be biased because of previous expectations or beliefs of the individuals.

The functionality of the attitudes is both personal, making the processing and organising of the information received in the environment possible, and social, since beliefs and values are not only expressed in the context of the group, but also facilitate belonging to it (Baron & Byrne, 1994). However, the relation between attitudes and behaviour is not as consensual as some initial studies would lead one to believe. The congruence of behaviour towards attitude depends on different factors such as the specificity, the robustness, the accessibility of the attitude (Baron & Byrne, 1994) and whether it was generated through direct behavioural experience (Feldma, 1985).

Prejudice and stereotypes are intrinsically related to the concept of attitude. Prejudice can be defined as a negative assessment of a group and its members (Myers, 2002). Like attitude, it has affective (sentiments directed towards elements of the group), behavioural (action or a tendency towards action) and cognitive (beliefs in the characteristics) components. Stereotypes consist of the generalisation by elements of a group of the characteristics and behaviour of another group, expressing not only the perception that the individual has of a group, but also the

expected behaviour (Nesdale & Durkin, 1998); stereotypes are reinforced by the selected attention (Baron & Byrne, 1994).

Once formed, prejudice and stereotypes are fairly resistant to change, although they can be altered through change of attitudes, acquisition of knowledge and direct contact with the targeted object (Baron & Byrne, 1994; Feldma, 1985).

The prevalent attitudes in society facing the elderly present a negative assessment (Donlon, Ashman & Levy, 2005; Fernández-Ballesteros *et al.*, 1992; Ellis & Morrison, 2005; Quinn & Burkhauser, 1993). There is a tendency to associate ageing with health insurance companies refusing contracts beginning at a certain age and employers preferring younger workers (Quinn & Burkhauser, 1993). Negative attitudes are reflected when the consumption of resources and goods are involved. The increase in life expectancy and the prolonging of human life beyond average limits verified some decades ago led to the repeated need for dealing with a new social group, which went from residual to dominant. The actual number of elderly people, with which the standard decline underlining primary ageing is associated (Schroots, 1995), absorbs an amount of economic, sanitary and social resources which is discussed more and more as a problem. Lack of knowledge about this population, or even the imposition of unfounded images, therefore lead to prejudice and stereotypes called *ageism* (Cavanaugh, 1997), since they use the age variable as a way to differentiate people. As happens in other areas, the formation of attitudes facing the elderly is a complex phenomenon, generated in different sources, which reflects on the elderly themselves who, then, interiorise negative beliefs associated with ageing (Hoffman, Paris & Hall, 1994; Nelson, 2002).

Prejudice is also transversal at different levels of functioning, from the media that repeat the image of an old person as someone isolated or boring to daily speech, in which adjectives like senile, or condescending behaviour prevail (Donlon, Ashman & Levy, 2005; Ellis & Morrison, 2005). Confronting an identical situation, an older person is assessed in a more negative way than a younger one (Fernández-Ballesteros *et al.*, 1992). The biased assessment of ageing is patent from an early age. In a study with 33 children aged between 3 and 5, Middlecamp and Gross (2002) found that negative categories were associated with the elderly when compared to young adults. Of the 22 basic-education pupils who participated in Schwalbach and Kiernan's study (2002), half responded that they had negative feelings towards their own ageing.

The research on attitudes towards ageing in higher education students is essentially based on three independent variables: gender (Paton *et al.*, 2001; Prudent & Tan, 2002), previous contact with older persons (Aday & Campbell, 1995; Cummings *et al.*, 2005; Kimuna *et al.*, 2005) and domain of study (Gorelik *et al.*, 2000; Heyman *et al.*, 2005; Neri & Jorge, 2006; Tan *et al.*, 2004). The results perpetuate the biased pattern of assessment prevalent in the general population. Using a sample of 441 students, whose average age was 19 and who attended sociology courses, Kimuna *et al.* (2005) concluded that erroneous beliefs existed on the part of students in relation to the elderly and that their principal source of information was the media. However, they also stressed that variables, such as age, race and political affiliation, were related to variations found in the results. Alford *et al.* (2001) obtained similar results from their sample, composed of 203 students in their first year of medicine, where the initial assessment of the participants was low; there were significant changes following the acquisition of knowledge and direct contact with the elderly.

Curiously, McLafferty (2005) cautions that direct contact will not always promote positive attitudes, since students may be placed close to older people with serious pathologies before acquiring the competence or knowledge to deal with them.

The attitudes of psychology students seem to fit this more global framework of a negative assessment. Prudent and Tan (2002) carried out a study with 201 students in social work, psychology, sociology and English and inhabitants of the Caribbean islands and concluded that only the participants who studied social work stood out because of their positive attitudes towards ageing, as measured on a scale of semantic differentials. But, a replica of the latter study with 199 students of political science, law, social work, Chinese, management, psychology and education in Chinese universities did not find statistically significant differences in the students' attitudes towards the elderly according to their study domain (Tan *et al.*, 2004).

On analysing higher education students' stereotypes towards working with the elderly, we came across three global nuclei. The first was in regard to the existing lack of challenge and the amount of knowledge necessary to perform tasks in that sector. The second was related to the absence of social status and acknowledgement and lower economic rewards. Finally, there was a general view that those who worked with the elderly had a low self-esteem rate and felt dissatisfied with their work (Cohen *et al.*, 2004).

Finally, it must be stressed that the change of attitudes and of the interest of students for the development of a professional career with the elderly occurs, as it happens with attitudes generally, through direct contact with the target of the attitude and the acquisition of knowledge about the same target (Baron & Byrne, 1994; Feldma, 1985). Keeping in mind that learning is an active and dynamic process, conditioned by the characteristics of the teacher, the student and the talked-about contents (Renzuli & Dai, 2001), there are no magical or predefined formulae that guarantee the acquisition of aspired concepts. However, the introduction of alternative strategies seems to be an efficient choice in teaching issues on ageing, as is indicated in the results of studies that resort to distinct techniques. Gattuso and Saw (1998) used fictionalised stories, whose action context was the same as that of the students, to promote empathy with the elderly. After reading the story, the students had to reflect on the person described. Analysis of the contents indicated that the students not only registered cognitive gains in learning facts about ageing, but also emotional gains by manifesting empathy with the elderly character. To refute the negative perspectives that the students of social work showed towards the possibility of developing a professional career with the elderly, Cohen *et al.* (2004) placed students and professionals face to face. At the end, the students had fewer myths about ageing, they had a clearer perspective of a career with the elderly and they manifested more interest in working with that population.

Varkey *et al.* (2006) implemented the *Ageing Game* with students of medicine. During an afternoon, a group of students simulated physiological (e.g. placing extra weight on their feet), sensorial (e.g. placing an opaque strip on their glasses) and social (e.g. dealing with condescending attitudes on the part of their peers) effects of ageing. In the final reflection, all the students stressed vulnerability and the consequent increase of empathy with the elderly. Pacala *et al.* (2006) assess as very positive the 10-year implementation of the *Ageing Game* for the possibility of

participated learning, for the gaining of consciousness on the processes of ageing and for its educational value.

The teaching-learning programmes (Dorfman *et al.*, 2004; Lewis, 2002) and the intergenerational programmes (Dellmann-Jenkins *et al.*, 1994; Klein, Council & McGuire, 2005; O'Quin, Bulot & Johnson, 2005) are mentioned here for their relevance in promoting positive attitudes towards ageing, since they allow students to contact the elderly in a controlled educational context. In this way, students can identify with the elderly, personalise their experience and model their attitudes towards ageing (Heyman *et al.*, 2005; Snyder, 2005). Cummings *et al.* (2005) defend the position that the acquisition of knowledge on ageing that is out of phase with direct contact with the elderly will not promote positive attitudes. However, direct contact with the elderly should be anticipated through the conveying of theoretical concepts, so that students can be prepared to deal with certain types of situations (Fagerberg *et al.*, 1997).

The Study

Goals

Literature on a predisposition towards working with the elderly by students in different courses shows the importance of understanding the reasons for the often low predisposition of university students in psychology. Therefore, this study conforms to the research on evaluating the teaching-learning programmes of other works, like those by Dorfman *et al.* (2004) and Lewis (2002).

This study has a double aim. The first consists in assessing, using a sample of psychology students, what knowledge exists on the processes associated with ageing, on the attitudes towards the elderly and on the interest in developing a professional career with this age group. The second is to analyse the differences in the same students after they have attended a course in *Adult Development and Aging* for one semester.

The Sample

The sample is made up of students in *Adult Development and Aging*, which is part of the compulsory curriculum of the Degree in Psychology of the Faculty of Education and Psychology at the Catholic University of Portugal. It is composed of 61 students whose mean age is 21.85 (sd = 4,8) and is mainly made up of women (only 8 of the participants are men). In similar works, one of the analysed dimensions is previous contact with older persons (Kimuna *et al.*, 2005); in relation to this variable, the analysis was done in terms of informal contact, i.e. in the family, and in terms of formal contact, in a context of work or a voluntary situation. In relation to an informal contact, we verified that around 15% of the students (n = 9) lived permanently with older family members and that 90% contacted older family members regularly (n = 50). Concerning contacts established in a formal context with older persons, data indicate that 12% of the students performed work tasks close to the elderly (n = 7) and 18% carried out voluntary tasks close to that population (n = 11). These results show that the students have very frequent contacts with the elderly, among the family, and less frequently in work contexts.

The Instrument

Not being acquainted with the existence in Portugal of a scale concerning assessment of attitudes and knowledge of higher education students towards the elderly, a scale was constructed specifically for this purpose, the Questionnaire of Gerontological Work (Quest_GW-3, Gonçalves & Martín, research version). Taking as a starting point the review of produced literature, a set of items of evaluation was defined (beyond the aspects of a socio-demographic nature): previous contacts with the elderly, interest in working with populations of distinct age groups, stereotypes on ageing, attitudes on developing professional careers with the elderly and knowledge on the processes of ageing.

The socio-demographic questionnaire permitted the collecting of information on gender, age, present level of studies and labour situation. In the section on previous contact with older persons, the objective was to assess the existing contact; students registered the informal (e.g. family members) and the formal (e.g. professional functions) contact with the elderly, and also their frequency. The interest in working with distinct populations was assessed through a *likert* system, comparing four age groups (children, adolescents, adults and the elderly). All the groups could be assessed from 1 to 5 and the higher the figure, the greater the interest in working with a certain age group.

The assessment of stereotypes was composed of 7 items, measured on a *likert* scale of 5 points (*Cronbach* = 0,743). This scale could fluctuate between 7 and 35; a higher figure implies a more positive perspective towards ageing. The *attitudes in relation to working* with the elderly were measured by 11 items, again with a *likert* scale of 5 points (*Cronbach* = 0,890). Again, some items were inverted, considering that the higher the figure (fluctuation between 11 and 55), the more positive the attitudes of the students towards the elderly. The *factual knowledge on the processes of ageing* was assessed through 44 'yes' or 'no' answers, adapted from Palmore (1988). Each correctly answered question was marked with a one, out of a total of 44 maximum, and the measurement of their internal consistency seems good (*Cronbach* = 0,789).

The Procedures

Data were collected through a questionnaire filled out in a group and handed out at two distinct moments: in the first (February) and in the last (June) class of the discipline. For statistical treatment, we considered each of these moments as a pre-test and a post-test, respectively. The instructions were initially given orally. It was explained to the students that the basic aim was to understand the existing image about the elderly. Along with the parameters of voluntarism and confidentiality, the message was conveyed that there was no assessment component in the task, i.e. the performance in the questionnaire would not be considered in the grade attributed to the student in the discipline. The questionnaires were filled out individually and marked with the last three digits of the student's identification for later comparison.

Between the first and second questionnaires, the students attended the *Adult Development and Aging* course as part of the degree in psychology. It was composed of 60 class hours (30 theoretical and 30 practical ones) during 15 weeks. Figure 1 gives the Guidelines of *Adult Development and Aging*. Fieldwork was also carried out to promote contact with contexts and models of ageing. The students

had to select one of two activities: (i) complete a naturalistic observation in an ageing context (e.g. a residence for the elderly) and (ii) carry out a life history of an old person. Both activities were prepared during an academic component of the course. The naturalistic observation of residences was inspired by *Multiphasic Environmental Assessment Procedure* (Moos & Lemke, 1996), while the life history was based on the suggested proposals by Knight (2004) and Sugarman (2004).

Adult Development and Aging is intended to play a pioneering role in promoting life-span and multidisciplinary approaches to adult development and aging, as the traditional childhood/adolescence-oriented approach in developmental psychology still predominates at Portuguese universities, along with a biomedical paradigm in gerontology. Considering that Portuguese society is demanding new and more adaptive psychological and socially founded practices related to old age, our goal in this subject is to develop a program of learning that can introduce students in the field of adulthood and aging. In our approach we are committed to knowledge, research and practice about adulthood and aging, as well as to discussion of ideological issues related to old age as a focus of scientific consideration. Standing a common basis of theory-oriented knowledge from a life-span perspective, the contents of this subject are guided by the following assumptions:

1. The aging process occurs in continuity with preceding development and is determined by the interaction of genetic-biological and socio-cultural variables.
2. Old people preserve the human potential for development within the limits placed by genetic heritage, life-styles, skills, personality, precedent experiences and present environmental conditions.
3. Development in old age relies largely on mechanisms of selection, optimization and compensation.
4. Aging and old age are heterogeneous experiences and phenomena. Normal and pathological aging are different patterns of aging, both possible.
5. Human development is a plastic process with scope and extension limited by genetic, biological, historical and environmental conditions.
6. An increasing probability of disfunctionality and irreversible developmental losses is associated with the later stage of old age.
7. Successful aging depends on the present and past experience of old people in each socio-cultural context, as well as on their cultural opportunities to the maintenance and enhancement of health, activity and involvement.
8. Successful aging indicators pertain to the objective and subjective domains, referring to health, and physical, psychological and social functioning.
9. Education is a major determinant of successful aging for individuals and groups. In adulthood and aging education includes formal experiences and informal experiences produced by many instances of personal and social interaction.
10. The study of adulthood and aging is a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary area that makes use of theoretical models and methods from several disciplines (biology, psychology and social sciences).

The research of adulthood and aging must investigate interindividual and intraindividual differences in adulthood and aging processes. This holds for comparisons across individuals, cohorts, social classes and societies, and across individual and historic time.

FIGURE 1. Guidelines of *Adult Development and Aging*

Results

As mentioned before, the aims of this study were to assess (i) knowledge on the processes associated with ageing; (ii) attitudes towards the elderly and towards the development of a professional career with this population and, intrinsically related to these, the stereotypes on ageing; and (iii) the interest in developing a professional career with this age group, analysing oscillations in these figures after attending *Adult Development and Aging*. The results of the scales of knowledge, stereotypes and interest in working with the elderly are shown in Table I.

TABLE I. Differences in the principal psychological variables associated with working with the elderly

Variable	Pre-test		Post-test		Test		
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	t	g.l	P
Stereotypes towards the elderly	16.71	(3.1)	16.34	(3.4)	1.09	59	0.280
Attitudes towards working with the elderly	40.07	(3.4)	41.20	(3.2)	-2.98	59	0.04**
Knowledge on the processes of ageing	31.05	(3.0)	32.90	(2.4)	-4.56	59	0.00***
Interest in working with the elderly	2.28	(1.2)	3.28	(1.3)	-2.76	59	0.08**

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

The raw data of the pre-test relating to interest in working with the elderly were not very high (2.28 out of 5), which is not surprising in light of the majority of studies in this area (Cummings *et al.*, 2005; Weiss, 2005). However, what was more interesting was to analyse the presence of students who showed less interest in working with the elderly following contact with them and knowing more about the process of ageing. We then verified that, after the intervention, 15 students (approximately one fifth of our sample) showed less interest in working with the elderly. This effect of the educational programme partially repeats the results obtained by other authors (Alford *et al.*, 2001), but a deep understanding of these dynamics demands more in-depth studies that are specifically conducted for this objective.

In relation to changes provoked by the educational programme, the results on the scale of assessment of stereotypes indicate that there were no significant differences between the first and the second assessment ($t(59) = 1.091$, $p > .05$), although there was a slight reduction, from 16.71 to 16.34. For the rest of the contrasts, differences between the two moments clearly appear. The results indicate statistically significant differences on the scale of knowledge assessment, where the mean number of answers increased from 31 to approximately 33 ($t(59) = -4.56$, $p < .05$). A significant increase was also verified in the interest manifested by the students in working with the elderly ($t(59) = 2.76$, $p < .05$) and also on the scale of assessment of attitudes towards working with the elderly ($t(59) = -2.98$, $p < .05$).

Discussion

The results obtained in this study seem to corroborate the review of the literature, since statistically significant changes were registered in the attitudes and knowledge of the students after attending the *Adult Development and Aging* course. Hence, we consider relevant the simultaneous combination of theoretical and factual data, such as direct contact with the elderly. However, and as referenced earlier, both the insertion of concepts on ageing and the promotion of contact with the elderly should be intentional and programmed so that the students can refute the biased ideas they have. Introducing, initially, successful models of ageing seems to be the more productive path, so that the potentiality of working close to this population can be highlighted (Aday & Campbell, 1995; Knapp & Stubblefield,

2005; Schwartz & Simmons, 2001), clarifying the existence of stereotypes that are often not even identified by the students (O'Hanlon & Brookover, 2002; Vondras & LorVang, 2004). Nevertheless, rejecting the persistent images of deficit and deterioration should not fall in the opposite extreme, since, on avoiding certain contexts, one may run the risk that students may consider the decline to happen only in pathological cases (O'Hanlon & Brookover, 2002).

It is also important to stress the teachers' role of moulding. As demonstrated in the area of research on the education and the change of attitudes (Baron & Byrne, 1994; Myers, 2002), observation significantly contributes to the attitudes that will be manifested by the students. In this way, teachers become preferential targets for the moulding of attitudes towards ageing, as demonstrated by McLafferty's study (2005), where the teachers of a nursing course not only manifested disinterest towards working with the elderly, but also considered that it was not their mission to motivate students. The absence of interest in this sphere of research in an academic context (Paton *et al.*, 2001), together with the conveying of theories that emphasise deterioration and vulnerability (McLafferty, 2005), also lead teachers to become a source of confirmation and worsening of students' stereotypes.

We defend that the promotion of favourable attitudes towards ageing and the consequent growing interest of students in working with the elderly do not only depend on the manifestation of interest on the part of teachers, a means of transmission of good practices and the demystification of stereotypes, but also on the adoption of appropriate alternative strategies of teaching the curricular contents. Taking into consideration the media's negative images, part of the solution consists in using innovative means of transmitting factual knowledge, simultaneously working on affective, cognitive and behavioural components of attitudes towards the elderly. Therefore, fictionalised stories (Gattuso & Saw, 1998), a focus group (Cohen *et al.*, 2004), simulators of ageing effects (Pacala *et al.*, 2006; Varkey *et al.*, 2006), teaching-learning programmes (Dorfman *et al.*, 2004; Lewis, 2002) and intergenerational programmes (Dellmann-Jenkins *et al.*, 1994; Klein *et al.*, 2005; O'Quin *et al.*, 2005) can be used to contradict the established ideas that characterise the image of the old person.

No doubt that taking advantage of strategies commonly absent from the classroom context implies some risks, such as the lack of scientific rigour of the contents or the trivialisation of teaching materials. However, once these factors are controlled, the resources and diversity can undoubtedly promote the conveyance of complex topics, like those of ageing. Therefore, though partly subscribing to the position of Gorelik *et al.* (2000), who defend that training and education can consolidate preexisting interests, but not provoke fundamental alterations in values, we also defend the position that teachers should be models for their students in conveying in a positive but realistic way the potentialities of professional careers that are close to the elderly.

NOTE

1. The definition of interest proposed by Renzuli & Dai (2001) is adopted: tendency or affective preference for certain objects, phenomena, topics or activities.

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